

Breaking the frame: lectures, ritual and academic literacies¹

Lucia Thesen

Abstract

Lectures are central to undergraduate academic literacy practices, yet they are a neglected area of research. This paper approaches the lecture through the lens of ritual studies, and sheds light on aspects of academic engagement that usually remain hidden. The approach used here emphasises the dynamic (rather than static) character of the ritualisation process, and foregrounds embodiment and symbolic meaning. The data are from a study of lectures in the Humanities in a South African university, and include ethnographic reconstructions of 'liminal moments' in two different lectures, as well as material from focus group discussions with students after the lectures. I argue that lectures have been prematurely written off, and that with ritual theory as a lens there is much to learn about participants' desire for engagement and about the relationship between micro processes 'on the ground' and wider institutional and political dimensions of academic engagement. I conclude by discussing the implications for academic literacies of lectures as a space in which the modes and meanings of orality rather than textuality are primary.

KEYWORDS: LECTURES; RITUAL; ACADEMIC LITERACIES; SOUTH AFRICA

Affiliation

Lucia Thesen, University of Cape Town.
email: Lucia.Thesen@uct.ac.za

Introduction

This paper extends current research in the academic literacies field by looking at a neglected site, the lecture. A significant body of work is available on writing and the politics of access, but relatively little research has been done on lectures in the critical tradition, although they are at the centre of the rhythms of undergraduate life. In the English for Academic Purposes tradition, research has focused on identifying the communication problems in lectures seen as the result of linguistic (Thompson, 2003; Camiciottoli, 2004) and intercultural (Flowerdew and Miller, 1995) miscommunication between English speaking lecturers and 'non-native' students. These studies tend to take lectures as given, rather than to probe more deeply into their communicative functions, particularly in postcolonial settings. The intention of this paper is to revisit the lecture as a contested site by bringing to it a theoretical lens from the domain of ritual studies.

There is a potentially problematic link between lectures and ritual in its everyday sense that needs to be acknowledged at the outset: the term 'ritual' connotes formality and empty conformity, as does the mass undergraduate lecture with its fixed positions for participants and lecture hall architecture that is resonant of the past. However, ritual as an analytical tool, and in particular as used in this paper, with an emphasis on the micro aspects of the process of ritualisation and what it achieves, introduces new ways of thinking about lectures that bring to light not only embodiment and performance, as one would expect of lectures, but also multivocal and distributed meanings, that cross over into adjacent sites of learning. These findings have important implications for the academic literacies field especially in view of the increasing diversity of student populations in higher education in southern Africa where the study reported in this paper is located, and in other Anglophone countries.

This paper engages with and challenges the often-stated view that lectures replicate empty conformity, and are out of step with dominant student-centred learning paradigms. They are generally regarded as important, but problematic, sites for teaching and learning. While they are economical in that one expert has face-to-face contact with large numbers of students they are critiqued for imparting information instead of fostering problem solving and critical thinking (Bligh, 1971) and, especially, for being a rigid space that 'freezes the hierarchy between lecturer and student, removing any responsibility on the students to respond' (Barnett, 2000: 159). A similar critique comes from research on the contribution of ICT's (information and communication technologies) to teaching and learning at universities (for example, Yellowlees Douglas, 2002). These studies tend to generalise about lectures at the institutional level.

However, while the critiques mount, the lecture persists, particularly in postcolonial settings, where resource constraints and historical time lags mean that we are often out of synch with mainstream theorising. This paper sets out to reveal some of what the critiques make invisible. Hidden in the name 'lecture *theatre*' is a clue to a different set of meanings that index the cultural rather than the educational domain, and which point to their ambiguity. The tension in lectures, the struggle between the strong coding of authority, single expertise and routine transmission on the one hand, and performance that introduces meanings related to physical presence and students-as-audience on the other hand, suggests that lectures are a fertile site for exploring meaning that conventional approaches to the examinable curriculum will not bring to the fore. It is these meanings that the use of ritual studies seeks to retrieve in this paper.

My decision to use ritual studies as a lens is an attempt to explore the ambiguities outlined above through ethnographic analysis. As McLaren (1993: 11) says, a 'ritological' approach has the potential to 'free classroom research from the tyranny of the literal, the obvious and the self-evident'. The questions I explore in this paper are: what does ritual theory bring to an analysis of lectures in a particular setting (the first-year environment in a university in Southern Africa) and secondly, what are the implications for academic literacies theory and practice? The intention is thus to 'break the frame' by bringing theory from another tradition to a familiar but overlooked academic setting to prize it open to fresh analysis. I argue in this paper that perhaps the dismissal of lectures has been too hasty, and studies of lectures and their meanings in specific sociopolitical contexts can shed new light on our understanding of the changing nature of academic engagement.

2 Research context: the university as a 'contact zone'

The data in this paper are from a doctoral research study that explores the complex meanings in lectures in the Humanities at Entabeni, a relatively elite, historically white² English medium university in post-Apartheid South Africa. This paper, like the larger study, is strongly situated in local meanings, and will thus be inseparable from its context, which is sketched below.

In this study, I think of Entabeni as what Mary Louise Pratt (1991/1999: 2) calls a 'contact zone', '...social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths' that students and lecturers have to negotiate.

The higher education landscape in which Entabeni holds an elite position has, in certain respects, changed dramatically in attempting to leave behind

its fragmented and discriminatory past. Under Apartheid, racial divisions were entrenched in separate (and by design, unequal) national administrative departments; language planning attempted to carry out the Apartheid logic of 'separate development' with the two official and colonial languages, English and Afrikaans, as media of instruction, forcing most students to study in an alien tongue at home; class differences were fixed in a sharp division between universities and vocationally-oriented 'technikons'. The most marked change in post-Apartheid universities is a rapid shift in student composition as previously excluded black students have entered the system, a shift that Cooper and Subotsky (2001) call 'the skewed revolution' because it is both profound and uneven across the sector.³

Jansen (2004) does an insightful analysis of both the breaks with the past, and the continuities that perpetuate inequality. Some of the changes noted (a move from collegial governance to managerialism, and an increase in transnational trade in enrolments) are the result of the combined effects of the end of Apartheid and the momentum of a globalising world. But there are important continuities, with the result that all institutions 'still bear the racial birthmarks in terms of dominant traditions, symbols and patterns of behaviour that remain distinctive despite the broader changes sweeping the higher education landscape' (Jansen, 2004: 311). These traces will be present in all aspects of university life. As South Africa continues with its 'skewed revolution' there will be struggles over meaning and symbols from which the lecture, with its co-presence of lecturer as authority in the company of large, diverse student communities, will not be exempt.

The students involved in this study are 17 first-year students, between the ages of 18 and 22, most of whom have recently left home and school, or begun their studies after work and travel experiences. They are in a threshold space in their process of 'ideological becoming' (Bakhtin, 1981: 342), in what Turner (1969: 95) refers to as a liminal time when they 'elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space'. They are between home and schooling and the imagined more open adult world of university, particularly in the Humanities, where few students are on a clear career path. While sharing certain similarities, they have also taken widely divergent sociocultural, educational and linguistic routes to university through the unequal terrain of the southern African sub-region. Two of the students who speak later in the paper illustrate these differences. Lerato is the daughter of subsistence farmers in northern Botswana. Most of her schooling has been in the medium of Sesotho. Riaan has also made a linguistic crossing, from a middle class Afrikaans medium school in Johannesburg, and has come to Entabeni after a 'gap year' in Europe. All

the lecturers in the study are white; most are men, and most are young. The lecturers described in this paper are Robert, part of the English speaking establishment that has been the backbone of Entabeni, but who chafes against this heritage, and Isobel, a Canadian, for whom settling in at Entabeni has not been easy. The identities of the participants in this research in many ways embody the changes and continuities in the higher education landscape in South Africa.

3 Ritualisation as an interpretive lens

In the rest of this paper, I weave ritual theory into an account of ‘critical moments’ of intensity or challenge in two lectures given by Robert and Isobel, as well as in the focus group discussions with students after the lectures. But first, it is necessary to locate myself in the complex and contested field of ritual studies⁴. The point of departure for this paper is the work of Goffman (1969, 1981) who shows how all interaction proceeds through rituals in which shared frames are negotiated among participants at different levels, from the small rituals of everyday life, to larger institutionally ratified occasions. These frames help orient participants to social action beyond particular events. For the purposes of this paper, his most illuminating study concerns the lecture (1981), in which he analyses how ‘the wider world of structures and positions is bled into’ the lecture (1981: 193). While the lecture is ostensibly about the text, it ‘allows a cover for the rituals of performance’ (1981: 194) in which the lecturer, through shifts in footing, stance, asides, and vocal tinting that are not possible in written texts, anticipates an audience, thus offering a palpable sense of presence to participants. Goffman alerts us to the importance of form, of embodied presence and of the symbolic access to authority offered by the lecture. Goffman’s work acknowledges the way the social ‘bleeds into’ the lecture, but does not offer detailed accounts of how this happens.

Three aspects of ritual theory, selected from an extensive and complex field, inform this paper:

- 1) I use the term *ritualisation* to draw attention to the process of making distinctions involving performance;
- 2) This process involves liminal, or unanchored, threshold moments, in which we can see the dynamics of ritualisation more closely;
- 3) This dynamic process turns on the body, and is experienced through shifts in embodied interactive states.

Ritual as a process of making distinctions through performance

As mentioned in the introduction, lectures appear as highly conventionalised, formal events, one of the vehicles through which authority in higher education institutions is instantiated. However in this paper, I am not concerned with deciding whether lectures qualify as rituals, or with describing them in terms of a fixed grammar. Instead, I draw on ritual as an unfolding process, i.e. on *ritualisation*, which Bell (1992: 74) defines as ‘a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities’. Rampton (2002: 3) elaborates on the centrality of making distinctions in ritualised processes. This ritual ‘way of acting’ involves:

...a heightened orientation to issues of transgression and respect. [...] it is fundamentally oriented to moments and periods where, for one reason or another, there are actual or potential changes and problems in the flow of ordinary life [...] They tend to generate an increased feeling of collectivity among (at least some of) the participants, and they also involve the participants in ‘performance’.

Ritualisation is not concerned with the more mundane, rational, instrumental means-and-ends functions, such as delivering up-to-date information, or helping students orient to the examinations, although those functions are undoubtedly important. It draws attention instead to the cultural politics of the situation, how (sub) communities and categories are created with feelings of belonging or alienation, how lecturers may perform to an audience, to impress, play with, charm, shock, seduce, or delight students, invoking strong feelings of affinity or distance.

The concept of performance is important here, and indexes a theoretical tradition in linguistic anthropology well reviewed by Baumann and Briggs (1990) and Duranti (1997). It alerts us to how participants co-create meaning, to the presence of evaluation in the aesthetic judgments by which speakers and audiences communicate, and to a degree of unpredictability, improvisation and creativity as participants adjust their frames of reference to those co-present, as well as to wider institutional and political discourses.

Returning to our process of ritualisation, the ‘orientation to respect or disregard’ Bell (1992) and Rampton (2002) speak of is achieved through engagement with symbolic performance. Distinctions are mainly realised through verbal and non-verbal symbols and embodied gestures. As symbols, they represent things indirectly, without naming them. A lecturer’s accent, how she walks, tells stories, gestures, whether she uses technologies such as Powerpoint, video, or props, or stands behind the podium, are all vital

signals, but people will attach different meanings to them. It is clear that in tracing the distinctions that participants create in ritual processes, it would be an impoverished study that only paid attention to language. Work in the multimodal social semiotic tradition of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), and in South Africa, Stein (2004) and Archer (2006), has shown that attention to the range of semiotic resources (speech, gesture, movement, image, music etc.) in addition to written language, liberates and makes visible a variety of meaning-making resources. These are particularly important in post-colonial situations where predominantly oral performance communicative patterns have been in forced contact with colonising, literate powers over long periods.

In addition to this interest in ritualisation as a process of creating distinctions around which participants orient themselves to action, two further concepts are used in this study. The first is liminality.

Liminality

Liminality, the construct that opens up the dynamic, transformative potential in ritual, is an important element in the work of anthropologist Victor Turner. The limen (margin) is the middle stage (between separation and reaggregation) in a ritualised process in which an individual moves from one status to another. This middle stage is a time when the 'normal' anchors of social structure are loosened and at play, and a 'sort of social limbo' prevails, and 'everyday social relations may be discontinued ... the social order may seem to have been turned upside down' (Turner, 1974/1982: 24/27). For Turner this threshold state can be experienced at many different levels, from fleeting moments, to events such as carnival, or periods of time-space in which individuals are between statuses, as for example, engaged to be married, or between writing exams and graduation. In this paper, I am particularly interested in liminal moments as fleeting periods of flux and ambiguity, in which the normal anchors (in lectures, the experience of boredom) are altered, and thrown open to intensity, inversion, reversal and other forms of strong identification, which provide people with memorable experiences that orient them to action. The liminal moments chosen for analysis in the lectures below, occur when there is slippage between official and unofficial roles (what Goffman, using his metaphors of performance, calls 'frontstage' and 'backstage' 1969: 109–140). Convention tells us that the lecturer, who is (or should be) the authority, will present a coherent view of something worth knowing. This frame may be altered or challenged, resulting in liminal moments, when the lecturer's authority is played with or subverted (as it is when Robert analyses a potent, taboo text below) or when Isobel breaks the

frame by asking the students to analyse *her*, rather than to engage with the academic content she is expected to point to. The next concept helps us to link liminality to embodied experience.

Shifts in bodily 'interactive states': boring vs engaged

The 'ways of acting' that Bell (1992) refers to, turn on the body, which mediates through what McLaren (1993: 83) calls '*interactive states*', defined as 'styles of interaction ... [that] consist of organised assemblages of behaviours out of which emerge a central or dominant system of *lived* practices' (original emphasis). The focus on lived practices places the body at the centre of meaning. These states are not absolute; elements are often co-present, and the relationships between them change over time. In this paper, I draw a contrast between the 'student state' (often characterised by an experience of boredom) and what I refer to broadly as the 'engaged' state,⁵ in which students feel strongly connected, whether in consent or resistance.

There is an additional possibility for action in processes of ritualisation that I would like to draw attention to. While participants may appear to be going along with the performed activity, ritual processes offer opportunities for people to hide. While present in body, what you are actually thinking and feeling can be held back in privacy, while you work out how you relate to the scheme of things. As Bell (1992: 93) says, it is a 'particularly 'mute' form of activity'. This is an important point in a 'contact zone' with its asymmetrical power relations. For students arriving at university with such different backgrounds, there is some value in being able to experience symbolic access, and to be able to observe and receive, as one can in a lecture, rather than having to produce language in spoken or written forms, where your accent, control of the English language, handwriting, or familiarity with technologies such as ICTs, will immediately mark you.

Next I outline aspects of the research process, and how the concepts outlined above – processes of drawing distinctions, liminality, and shifts in interactive states – have informed the selection and analysis of data.

4 The research process

The study focused on the first-year experience, though students were also interviewed in subsequent years, to see whether their stances on lectures had changed over time. In the first-year interviews, I asked students about their biographical routes to university, and which lectures they enjoyed, and would not want to miss. Clear distinctions emerged around which lectures and lecturers the students saw as 'boring', in contrast to those they would not want to

miss – the ‘engaging’ lecturers. Students talk about them informally, take sides rather like fan clubs, and desire to be taken seriously. The engaging lecturers are the ones who make the effort, enjoy the presence of students, use the space for contact and a different function to that made available by the textbook, the notes, or the library.

Some of the lecturers they identified as ‘not to be missed’ were approached to take part in the study. I attended selected lectures chosen in consultation with the lecturers, and video taped them if lecturers were comfortable with this. Where lecturers did not want to be videoed, I analysed other texts (lecture notes and online discussions) linked to the lectures. After each lecture, focus group meetings were held⁶ with the students, in which I asked them what they recalled, emphasising that I was not ‘testing’ them, but was interested in their general responses to lectures, and what they took away from them. These focus group discussions led me back to analyse particular moments in the lectures that students had identified. These moments in the lectures – liminal moments of intensity, where students seemed to be strongly engaged, whether in agreement or disagreement with the lecturer or with their peer groups – were closely analysed, using multimodal discourse analysis where video footage allowed, or through ethnographic reconstruction from fieldnotes where video record was not available. In this paper, data are from a) critical moments in two of the lectures analysed, and b) from the focus group discussions after these lectures. In these focus groups, I was able to get some insight into students’ different stances on the lectures, into the character of the distinctions they were drawing, and how they took different positions on these liminal moments.

5 Bodies on the line: critical moments in the lecture

The methodological choice to focus on the positive (the lectures the students would not want to miss) led me to follow students’ interests and desires, and also eased access to lecturers, who did not feel they were being evaluated in a mechanistic way. The lecturers involved in the larger study are skilled and confident teachers, nominees for Entabeni’s prestigious ‘distinguished teacher’ award. Their lectures are not typical of the more conventional ‘boring’ lectures from which the students distinguish them. Their lectures are analysed in the knowledge that they are emblematic of the ‘engaged’ pole of the distinctions that the students make.

The accounts that follow describe two lectures, and pick out critical moments that students referred to in the focus groups after each lecture. In these moments, there was a sense of collective attention, a shift from the default setting of the student state to an altered state of engagement, with

different physical and emotional energies attendant in each case. Since I was also present at the lectures, I recognised the moments of intensity the students described. I will depict the setting and context in some detail for the reader to more fully imagine these events and how shifts in state are recognised and interpreted.

A ritual analysed and resisted

The first moment is in a large interdisciplinary foundation course in the Humanities, compulsory for all first-year students. It is five weeks in to the term, and Robert is lecturing to a full lecture theatre. He is a passionate and committed teacher, and gives off a sense of the establishment in accent and rhetoric, but is also transgressive in his open displays of disrespect for authority, and his play with political correctness and seduction. Students react strongly, often challenging him, but always responding. His frame of reference for the lecture is clearly communicated to the students at the beginning of the course, as he urges them to 'see the lectures as a concert', and not be passive receivers of authority. He discourages students from taking lecture notes, telling them not to accept the 'kragdadige'⁷ speaking position of the lecturer. His dismissal of note-taking challenges the conventional frame of what to attend to in lectures. This makes some students anxious, as they look for clear guidelines for essays and exams.

At this point in the course, they are engaged in a case study on representation and power, in which they will analyse representations of the game of cricket, cricketers and cricketing nations. The lecture revolves around a series of photographs⁸ of a cricket competition in Kentani, in the rural Eastern Cape, one of the poorest provinces in South Africa. In tutorials alongside the lectures, we are teaching students the skills of textual analysis. Robert is performing the process of doing a critical analysis. The images are very different from the media images of the game, particularly at the time the lecture was given, when South Africa was host to the cricket 'World Cup'. In the lecture, the images are glossy and potent, projected in a steeply raked, darkened lecture theatre. One image is particularly arresting, and is met by a hush, a palpable silence (see Figure 1). It shows two young Xhosa men, unconventional spectators, dressed in the traditional clothes of the ritual of initiation into manhood, wearing rough blankets, with white clay on their faces. They are the focus of the image, but are in the background, sitting with relaxed posture, while in the foreground, out of focus, is a red cricket ball, about to make contact with a blurred cricket bat. The young men in the picture gaze simultaneously at the unfolding cricket game, the (white) photographer, and the audience in the lecture theatre.



Figure 1

Robert, who began the lecture by urging students to impose their own meanings on the image, refers to the image as ‘an anthropological classic – a tour de force’, describes the cricket shot as ‘an immaculate forward defensive stroke’ and asks: ‘Who owns this image?’ He concludes that it is ‘they’ (the initiates) who own the image, ‘dragging it out of the province of cricket’. Yet his language of analysis is heavily freighted with a wide range of social languages (academic analysis, ‘in-house’ cricket terms, photo-documentary analysis) which create what Wertsch (1990: 120) calls a distancing ‘voice of decontextualised reason’. This voice indexes privileged perspectives that employ abstract, formal, logical categories, rather than ‘information from the unique context’ to understand. The voice adopted effectively silences, for the moment, alternative readings and responses to the image.

Multimodally the image here is central, bringing the initiates into the lecture theatre, breaking the convention that excludes initiates from social interaction while undergoing initiation. For us as audience in the lecture theatre, our reading is orchestrated by Robert’s style which is performed most powerfully through gesture. Much of the time, he points up at the image, creating a vector in which the action emanates from him, while the initiates appear to have something done to them. A close analysis⁹ shows that at key points in his text,

his gestures further underscore *his* authority, rather than the initiates', to own the image. At one point, in describing the image, he refers to the 'immaculate forward defensive shot' and at the same time, acts out an iconic gesture of the batsman in the game of cricket, miming a forward defensive shot. Later, he refers to the boys 'wearing their blankets, and clayed in the white clay of initiation and regeneration'. On saying 'clayed in the white clay', he moves his open hand across his chest, as if identifying closely with the experience of the initiates. In both gestures, he signals insider status to two rituals of manhood – the game of cricket, and the practice of initiation into manhood in 'traditional' (and marginal) social groupings.

In ritual terms, the episode in the lecture is powerful. Robert has already broken the lecture frame by describing lectures as concerts. In the image, the frame of the ritual of initiation is also broken, by representing the young men at a cricket match. Writers such as Majer (1999) and Ngwane (2002) have shown how initiation practices have been a faultline for resistance to Apartheid and colonial institutions, the source of the voice of decontextualised reason. While Robert would have been fully aware of this, he did not draw attention to this in the lecture.

I shall briefly focus on students' reactions to this lecture and to this moment. Their responses show that while lectures in general are critiqued for seeming to promote consensus, a ritual analysis 'on the ground' shows the polysemous nature of the symbols – his style of using language, his gestures and the image under discussion – as individuals respond to them in different ways. Glimpses into one of the focus groups show us how students analysed Robert's style. They acknowledge his influence, but also note that he 'wants us to be skeptical about him'. When I ask what they recall, these are the responses:

Riaan: The way the photos [points upwards] It was kind of dark, the pictures were up there, big, and little Robert [pointing downwards].

Lindee: He moves from serious, academic to lighthearted talk. He does it quite well.

Sabelo agrees with Lindee, picking up the point, but parodying him. The parody is a cue to the others, who follow Sabelo with obvious enjoyment, which is halted by Riaan's sober observation that Robert is 'exposing' himself:

Sabelo: He moves from play to seriousness. Like he's saying 'I don't care but you have to listen'.

Lindee: 'I've got something to say' [mimicks Robert]

Mark: 'I know I'm good'

Lindee: 'I'm the man'

Riaan: It's very exposing.

Students see through the performance, and play with it, and manage to inflect it with their own, collective evaluation. In Bakhtin's terms, they have drawn the privileged voice of authority into a contact zone, and made it 'half ours and half somebody else's' (1981: 345). The focus group offers a forum for them to voice and perform their meanings.

Robert's discussion of the image of the initiates is mentioned in two of the focus groups. It is introduced by Lerato, who like Riaan in a separate group, also finds his style 'exposing' but for her, this is enabling: the risk he has taken encourages her to make herself more open. She saw this moment in the lecture as evidence of Robert's dislike of stereotypes of Africans, and his 'encouraging of how things have transformed' [in post-Apartheid South Africa]. For her, a white South African male giving ownership to the initiates is a progressive sign, a sign of respect. Bongani, on the other hand, resented the way the image was presented.

That picture of the initiation, it was like made up. They're not supposed to sit amongst people [during initiation]. They're supposed to sit in the bush.

I followed up this comment in discussion later, when Bongani explained, that as a Xhosa man, he had gone through the initiation process ('I can't remember any stage in my life where I felt more confident'). He explained why he had not said more in the focus group: 'I was the only Xhosa guy so I didn't really want to say a lot'. He found Robert's commentary

a bit offensive. The initiation ceremony is controversial. There are lots of people who fight over this stuff. Like that picture was showing the bad side of what's supposed to be done, showing people not respecting their culture [watching cricket during initiation], but we claim that we do [respect our culture].

Their responses show that while we were all present at the lecture, and were witness to the same performance, we reacted in very different ways. Using Goffman's concepts of regions (1969), what drew audience attention to this as a liminal moment, was the way the initiates moved from 'backstage' (in their place, as object of analysis, or example) to 'frontstage' (as judges of the cricket, the white photographer, and all of us in the lecture theatre). What this meant to us depended on our accumulated cultural capital. The comments indicate how students are making distinctions based on their readings of symbols. While appearing to promote consensus and buy-in at an institutional level, ritualised action lends itself to struggles over the symbolic terrain, and potential ways of acting in the world.

This brief analysis has explored a critical moment witnessed by participants in a lecture demonstrating the process of critical analysis. Through the lens of ritual analysis, it is a liminal moment, a breach in the 'normal' flow of the lecture, although Robert's lectures are in themselves a challenge to this normality. Close analysis of the symbols – image, and verbal and gestural style – shows how the dominant academic voice of decontextualised reason overrides other meanings, which found some space for expression in the focus groups, as part of the research process.

The next episode shows a different use of expertise, a more distributed potentially democratic form of expertise that invites participation.

'Celebrity-me': body as text

Next, I touch on Isobel's lecture in an introductory course on media and society. Like Robert, her frame of reference for lectures is performance oriented, and responds to the student desire for contact and recognition. Isobel says in an interview:

I really believe that people learn better if they're having fun [...] The fact that I'm having fun playing with costumes and clips and images and music that I enjoy makes it easier for me to bring the material to life for the students, and to maintain my own interest

It also sustains her in the face of the constraints of being a woman in the academy, what she refers to as a 'marking machine'. In her words, we can recognise references to shifts in interactive states: performing in lectures is about imagination and engagement, while being a marking machine exemplifies the 'bored' state of captured time and closely aligned means and ends.

This lecture is the second in a series on celebrity and the media, with the title *Celebrity: making a spectacle of oneself*. She is exploring how media stars typify and individuate dominant ideologies that shift over time. Students have seen screenings of Marilyn Monroe in the film *Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend*, and a re-working of the meaning of stardom in Madonna's more recent *Material Girl*. She starts by breaking the ritual frame in which the lecture usually opens. Once everyone is in the lecture, and it is time to begin, instead of walking in, clearing her throat, shuffling papers, or adjusting the overhead projector, the moves that usually signal the beginning of the lecture, the lights go out on an empty 'stage', effectively changing the genre from lecture to dramatic performance. Then a spotlight picks up Isobel, in blond wig, flashy jewellery and tight red dress, dressed up as Marilyn Monroe. She proceeds to get students to interactively analyse the celebrity body (including her own) as text. An interesting liminal moment is the point at which she asks

them to 'read' her body, noting particularly her 'sagging boobs and pot-belly'. As Goffman (1981: 140) says, this is not 'done' with canonical texts like public lectures where the convention is that 'it is as if one must look at the speaker, but not see him (sic)' (1981: 140). She has moved from orchestrator (the frontstage identity of the lecturer) to fully embodied object of analysis, a function usually suppressed or not openly admitted to in lectures. At this point in what is otherwise a highly interactive lecture, students appear reluctant, almost shy, to engage.

Outside of the lecture, in the focus group¹⁰, and the online discussion forum, and emails to me, rich discussion is taking place. Laura, who cannot be present at the focus group, reflects in an email that

she [Isobel] really loves her work. She's so into it that you're happy to dive right in too. I admire the way she puts herself at the mercy of her audience and asked us to deconstruct her image and explain why she didn't look like a star. She took all the blows about unshaved armpits and slouching.

In the focus group however, a different dynamic develops. I start the focus group by asking students to write down their impressions of the lecture. After jotting down some points, Salama leads:

Salama: Dressing up - she always does.

Marianne: It's as if she would do anything for us.

Riaan: I don't like her lectures at all [...] She gives us *her* analysis of things. Saying things like 'when we see these things, how celebrities are'. These are *her* ideas. It's very patronizing filling in the question. It doesn't work for me, this kind of approach.

When Marianne and Salama refer to feeling at home in her lectures, with the sense of safety they experienced at school, he interjects: 'We're not at school anymore', and describes the way she places her finger on her mouth to indicate silence 'as if she were speaking to four year olds', and sets up and answers her own questions 'positioning' the students. He is carving out a critical space, an identity that questions everything, perhaps working against the stereotype of the white Afrikaner male. The other students (both women) defend Isobel, noting the levels of interaction in her classes, the lengths she will go to in engaging them, and challenging Riaan to acknowledge that perhaps he prefers male lecturers: 'Maybe you listen better to male lecturers!' says Salama. They compare Robert and Isobel, and disagree on how much space each person allows them. Riaan's strong feelings are not expressed in the lecture (norms of politeness prevail) but on the website where he is very angry with Isobel for getting his name wrong:

please note: My name is actually Riaan and not Richard (that?s twice).

Isobel's lecture breaks the frame by turning her academic identity into a text to be analysed, and so forcing students out of their comfort zones. She urges students not just to look or listen to her, but to analyse her. But the students did not appear to take her up on this invitation. Isobel brings this up again on the website under the subject-line 'Celebrity-me':

Hi everyone, thanks for being so responsive in the lecture today ... the thing that nobody pointed out (you are so polite!) was that my pot belly and saggy boobs are signifiers of motherhood and I think it's a shame that this is not something that our culture celebrates more.

She feels strongly enough to carry the unanswered question over into the chat-room, where she explains the academic (and personal) point she wanted to make.

Both lecturers have put their bodies on the symbolic line and taken risks that afford liminal moments of reversal, of play with the dominant forms, where categories of sacred and profane, of work and play, mind and body, merge. These moments of engagement energise the students, and create space for what Bakhtin (1984) calls the 'open' body, as unfinished, part of the world. These lectures are a long way from the typical 'expository approach [that is] unsuitable to stimulate thought or change attitudes' that Bligh (1971: 223) describes. Both lectures also make use of the performative space, but Isobel makes more conscious use of the affordances of ICTs alongside the lecture, in putting lecture notes and assignments on the course website after each lecture, and in the presence of a lively chat forum, where the students can change the communicative order imposed by lectures. Here, they can introduce topics, write back, and comment on lectures. With Robert's lecture, it is less clear how the feelings raised in the lecture theatre are worked through for the students.

6 Bringing the strands together: implications for academic literacies

It is important to bring this discussion back to its educational setting, to consider questions of research and practice. I return to the questions posed earlier on in this paper: what does ritual theory bring to an analysis of lectures in a particular setting? And what are the implications for academic literacies? First, through this close-up analysis, that looks underneath the received view of lectures, this research suggests that lectures have been prematurely written off as in decline, and inevitably authoritarian. The application of concepts from ritual theory to lectures has foregrounded neglected aspects of academic engagement,

most strongly the embodied, performed aspects of academic identity. The ritual elements in lectures become visible as we see how students create distinctions between 'boring' and 'engaged' states, and how these distinctions mobilise them to act. The lecturers find moments of connection with their 'audiences', that enable students to shift style, or state. This embodied perspective on academic practice recognises contradictions (that your body may appear to conform, but what you think and feel and desire are private, and emerge over time); it is 'in the flesh' and immediate, and therefore favours the modes and messages of orality and performance. It is important to ask what place we have made for students to have face-to-face contact with expertise and authority. Ironically, the rise of the 'new media' may perhaps strengthen, rather than weaken, the meaning and semiotic potential of lectures. As the online environment gets drawn into pedagogy and assessment, and with the increased 'textualisation' of academic work, for both students and lecturers, this performative face-to-face aspect may be kept alive, as it has been for Isobel.

The analysis also stresses the need to approach academic literacies as distributed across multiple sites. The focus on lectures has underscored how they are embedded in a 'semiotic landscape' (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996) in which lectures are just one activity that must be looked at alongside others, in particular, the new media of ICTs and virtual learning environments, and essay writing, as well as the informal spaces that Canagarajah (2004) calls 'safe pedagogic houses' (see discussion in Luna and Canagarajah, this issue) where asymmetries of history, modes and power can be directly addressed. He writes of the value of understanding what goes on in the 'safe spaces' available in the interstices of formal education, and of understanding how students 'shuttle' between these and the official and often exclusionary practices of writing. An analysis of ritualised action as students (and academics) make these crossings, between sites of learning and disciplines, of how interactive states shift in the process, and how verbal and non-verbal symbols function across spaces, would be revealing. Lectures may be shown to be relatively safe spaces compared to spaces in which one has to make one's mark, and in which there is no alibi. These spaces typically involve writing, whether on or off-line.

In conclusion, as mentioned earlier, this study is not concerned with evaluating lectures, but with approaching them for analysis from a new angle in order to explore their potential contribution to academic engagement. Whether they can be used to open up and democratise expertise, or whether they simply reinforce all the old frozen hierarchies of the classed, raced and gendered 'voice of decontextualised reason', cannot be resolved here. However, one thing that does seem clear is that the high walls that keep them hidden need to be breached, so that they are more visible, talked about constantly, not in the

narrow terms of the instrumental curriculum, but in fuller, situated, embodied, political terms. It is clear that intense identity work is taking place in student responses to lectures, with strong affect and voice that does not often translate into students' writing. Some of the most interesting and generative research on writing in the academic literacies tradition (Angelil-Carter, 2000; Lillis, 2001; Bangeni and Kapp, 2006) is permeated by a concern for a lack of 'voice', an authenticity of position that has been set aside in the gap between safe talk among peers, or other low-stake groups, and written work for institutional sanction. There is rich material in lectures for reading the value systems and ethos of the experts who are the audiences for students' writing. We should find ways to bring this material into other spaces such as the focus groups linked to this research project, tutorials, online learning environments, for commentary and debate, to be refracted and reaccentuated by students, and also by lecturers, who seldom share their lecturing practices.

About the author

Lucia Thesen is a Senior lecturer in the Language Development Group in the Centre for Higher Education Development, University of Cape Town. She is interested in academic literacies and the politics of access. Her most recent publication (2006, edited with Ermien van Pletzen) is *Academic Literacy and the Languages of Change* (Continuum).

Notes

- 1 I am indebted to Sofie Geschier for her help with recording lectures and focus groups, and for her enthusiasm and insight in working with data. I would also like to thank colleagues who have commented on this paper, particularly Linda Cooper and Rochelle Kapp, and the editors and reviewers of this special edition.
- 2 The ongoing use of the terminology of racialised identity in post-apartheid South Africa needs some explanation. In this paper I use these terms where they seem relevant as indicators of historically invested categories of power and privilege. All of these terms are problematic and contested, but not using them is an evasion of the way history shapes the present. 'Black' is used inclusively to refer to 'African', 'Coloured' and 'Indian'.
- 3 The overall enrolment of black students in universities has risen from 32 per cent in 1990 to 60 per cent in 2000 (Cooper and Subotsky, 2001), but this figure hides complex underlying processes that index class, gender, urban-rural divides, and the historical character of universities. At the university where this study took place, approximately half of students are black, and are increasingly middle class.

- 4 McLaren's classic study of how schooling creates distinctions that disadvantage working class Portuguese students in a Catholic high school in Canada includes an excellent overview of the state of ritual studies, as well as an explanation for why it has been regarded as out of step with contemporary cultural and educational theorising.
- 5 In the larger study, adapting McLaren's distinctions, the engaged state is further broken down into home, street corner, entertainment and sanctity states.
- 6 I facilitated the focus groups, while my colleague Sofie Geschier took handwritten notes of who said what. On the two occasions that she was unable to be present, I tape recorded the discussion.
- 7 An Afrikaans word meaning 'powerful', now used ironically to signal a unitary concept of power and authority, with connotations of the Apartheid state.
- 8 The photographs were taken by Mike Hutchings. The image discussed in this article has been reproduced in the 2004 book *Moving in Time: images of life in a democratic South Africa* edited by George Hallett.
- 9 A detailed multimodal analysis of Robert's talk about the image is to be found in Thesen (2006).
- 10 There were three focus groups following Robert's lecture, because of the large number of students taking the course he convened, which was compulsory to over a thousand students. There was only one meeting for Isobel's lecture in an optional course later in the year.

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